

RUSKIN BOND: IN THE LAP OF THE HIMALAYAS

— MEENA KHORANA

Ruskin Bond, who has been living in Mussoorie for over thirty years, has made the Himalayas a part of his life and work as a writer. He finds endless material for stories in the trees and wild flowers, birds and animals, rocks and rivers, and simple hillfolk who are an integral part of the mountains. Through his poems, essays, fiction and autobiographical writings for young children, Bond explores his own and his protagonists' changing relationship with the Himalayas—from the freedom of childhood to a deep love and communion with various manifestations of nature.

Ruskin Bond's stories for young children are generally set in a small, isolated Himalayan town or village which still retains its "inherited values of basic honesty, faith and love for the family and neighbours" (Saraiya 3). Parents do not worry about the safety of their children who roam freely without fear of violence or crime because people from the hills are quick to smile, hospitable, and trusting. Against such a benign atmosphere, Bond envisions his own and his protagonists' childhood as a long summer afternoon of gaiety, play, and care-free abandon. His characters swim in forest pools, take naps under shady trees with butterflies and beetles humming lazily overhead, climb

mango and lichi trees, ride bicycles down precipitous hills and explore river and mountain paths. The timeless, magical atmosphere of the hill station in summer or during vacation quickly envelops his stories.

This innocent and mischievous fun of childhood and freedom from a rigid daily regimen and adult restrictions are best captured in *The Road to the Bazaar*, a collection of short stories. The stories describe the simple joys and sorrows of childhood, where the only worries are associated with the desire to be on the cricket team, early morning beetle races while parents are still asleep, and fear of parental anger at a bad report card.

In the short story, *The Long Day*, Bond explores the triumphs and fears of childhood with sensitivity and gentle irony when thirteen-year-old Suraj leaves home early one morning because he does not want to be at home when the postman brings his report card showing his failure in class. He spends the entire day playing football, watching trains puff in and out of town, steals liches, eats spicy snacks in the bazaar, and returns home exhausted and hungry only to find that reports are due the next day. There is immediate relief and then fear of tomorrow.

Even when the children are in potentially dangerous situations, nature serves as a protective mother. In *Flames in the Forest*, eleven-year-old Romi rushes home after school on his new bicycle even though the forest he has to cross is burning. Romi is unaware of the very real danger of the fire. His calm optimism that he will reach the safety of the river despite the enveloping flames is contrasted with the panic of his young friend whom he rescues and the animals fleeing across his path in terror. Likewise, in *The Adventures of Rusty*, Rusty and his friend Daljit run away from the strict regimen of their British boarding school in Simla to explore the mysterious world beneath the mountains. They take short cuts through Himalayan jungles, wade through mountain streams, and come face-to-face with a tiger, yet no harm comes to them. Their young lives are charmed as they travel 800 miles from Simla to the port

city of Jamnagar to catch a ship sailing to romantic far-off places. However, the ship has already sailed before their arrival. A telegram to a relative gets them safely back to school, and the escapade from authority has no serious consequences. On the contrary, the dream of running away serves as a heroic quest that leads to growth and a search for identity.

Social distinctions among children are irrelevant in this mellow atmosphere: British and Indian, rich and poor, Christian and Hindu, brahmin and low-caste mingle as equals. In *The Hidden Pool*, for instance, fifteen-year-old Laurie, the son of a British engineer in India, Anil, the son of a cloth merchant, and Kamal, a vendor of knick-knacks and a high school student, are good friends. Their friendship is sealed forever and they cross cultural and economic barriers when they go alone on an expedition to the Pindari Glacier, 12,000 feet above sea level. Even after Laurie returns to England, he longs for the serenity of the Himalayas and the secret pool in the mountains. Laurie, like the other British children in Bond's stories, appreciates the easy friendship and disarming warmth of his Indian friends who introduce him to the tastes, smells, and beauty of the Himalayan town.

Similarly, barriers between young and old are bridged and there is a loving nurturing relationship between them. The love between six-year-old Rakesh and his grandfather in *The Cherry Tree* is reminiscent of the autobiographical pieces about Bond and his grandfather in *A Garland of Memories* and *Grandfather's Private Zoo* and Bond's own attachment for his godson, Rakesh, the son of his housekeeper. In *The Cherry Tree*, Rakesh plants a cherry tree and cares for the tender sapling through its difficult first year when a goat eats it and then a grasscutter cuts it in two; yet, the sturdy tree grows to full maturity over the year and bears fruit. Birds, cicadas, and bees visit it as often as Rakesh and grandfather do. While Rakesh is proud and amazed at his special tree, readers become aware of the love with which grandfather is raising Rakesh. Like the tree, Rakesh has also grown taller and stronger and can help his father in the fields, but a loving, nurturing re-

lationship binds him to grandfather.

If the mountains provide children with a carefree and sheltered life, they also lead children to a realization of their spiritual affinity with the various manifestations of nature. Whether it is a cherry tree, the pulsating, noisy *Bazaar* which is at the heart of every Himalayan town, a window on the roof from which to view the world, a hidden pool, or an old banyan tree, a single image serves as a symbol of harmony with nature and a transcendental vision of life. In *A Little World of Mud*, a short story in *Grandfather's Private Zoo*, the scummy, muddy pool behind the house becomes the microcosm of the world to Rusty. It is here that the lonely British child meets Ramu the buffalo herder, and learns of the diversity of nature. Ramu, although uneducated, is well-versed in Hindu mythology and the folklore surrounding the various animals and their predators that live at the pond. Although Ramu belongs to a different culture and religion, young Rusty discovers that Ramu shares the same opinions regarding the sacredness of all life as does his Christian grandfather. Another haven that Rusty had was the old banyan tree in his grandparents' home in Dehra Dun. In the branches of this ancient tree Rusty reads, plays with squirrels, and observes nature and human life passing by. Like the squirrels and birds who live in the tree, Rusty also keeps his most treasured possessions in a hole in the tree.

Ruskin Bond and his young protagonists develop an especially touching relationship with trees. Like the ancient Hindu *rishis*, Bond believes that trees are sacred. He writes, "...shade-giving trees symbolize the harmony between man and nature, and our ancestors, in their devotion to trees, and reverence for them, clearly showed that they knew what was good for them" (Garland 35). This love for trees Bond owes to his father and grandfather, both of whom were fond of planting trees. In *Once Upon a Monsoon Time*, he narrates an episode about the trees he planted with his father in a dry riverbed in Dehra Dun just before his father's death. When he returned to the same scene after returning from England, the trees had

multiplied and seemed to whisper a greeting to him. Such images of trees and creeping vines moving toward his father and grandfather in an effort to communicate appear repeatedly in his poems, essays, and short stories. Bond believes that trees could once walk about like people till someone cast a spell on them and rooted them in one place. He looks forward to the time when trees will be able to walk again freely. This is quite obviously a metaphor for the senseless destruction of trees in the Himalayan region. Bond pleads that trees are important to the birds and animals who live in the forests, as well as to humans for fruit and timber, for attracting rain, and for preventing soil erosion and keeping the desert away.

Bond's father and grandfather were also instrumental in inculcating a respect for the rights of animals on earth. In *Grandfather's Private Zoo*, a collection of short stories based on his experiences, Bond humorously describes his grandfather's menagerie of unusual housepets: Toto, the monkey, who rips everything to shreds; the narcissistic python who admires himself in the mirror; Tinkerbelle, the goat, who butts people and ruins the garden; Harold, the Hornbill, who bounces tennis balls; and Timothy, the well-behaved tiger. Grandfather appears to be eccentric, but in reality he respects animals and tries to save them from being killed or from dying of a wound or starvation. While grandma is portrayed as the antagonist who tries to foil grandfather's attempts to sneak more animals into the house, she tolerates them and even nurses them back to health. In another humorous story, Rusty accompanies Uncle Henry and his friends on a *shikar* expedition in the Terai jungle. Dismayed at the thought of shooting wildlife, young Rusty prefers to spend his time reading on the verandah of the hunting lodge. Even though the jungle resounds with drums, the tigers evade the "manly" hunters, while Rusty, who is called a "sissy" for staying behind, sees a deer in the Sai trees and a full-grown panther making off into the jungle with one of the dogs. The *shikaris*, who could shoot only an occasional partridge, leave the next day thinking there is no big game left in the jungle.

WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR

Panther's Moon and *Tigers Forever* are Bond's strongest pleas for the preservation of wildlife. Both novels illustrate that tigers turn into man-eaters only because of human greed and fear, rapid deforestation and upsetting of the ecology, and a violation of the trust placed in humans by nature. *Tigers Forever* is the story of a majestic old tiger who had lived peacefully near a village in the Himalayas, and with the help of a village boy had cleverly managed to evade hunters from the city. However, when a forest fire starts in the tall, dry grasses due to the carelessness of some city folk, the tiger's natural habitat is destroyed overnight. The wild deer and pigs he fed on, leave the territory and the hungry tiger is eventually forced to attack the villagers' cattle. In a desperate struggle for survival, the villagers ambush and shoot the tiger. Luckily, the slightly wounded tiger falls in the Ganges and is carried to the opposite bank where he finds a suitable habitat and a mate. The villagers miss the tiger and feel that something vital is now missing from their lives.

This yearning for nature and a pre-technology village is best illustrated in "The Tunnel" in *The Road to the Bazaar*. Suraj, who is fascinated by trains, goes to the watchman's hut to see the night train pass by. Before the train arrives, the watchman goes into the tunnel to push out the leopard from his favourite haunt for fear it will be killed by the approaching train. To Suraj, the train represents the beautiful fire-breathing dragon of his dreams, but the reader quickly realizes that it is the one jarring note in the jungle's silence. It is a mechanical intruder that represents the disharmony, power, and danger of the city; the jungle holds its breath and freezes till the train has passed.

When Ruskin Bond's nature writings for children are viewed collectively, they present a holistic picture of the author's life and work. The distinctions between the writer and his characters blur: it is immaterial whether Ruskin Bond, or Rusty, or Suraj runs away from home/school in Simla, or whether Bond's father or grandfather planted trees in the dry river bed; what is important is that Bond strongly draws the reader into the experience. The several

worlds and perspectives of Ruskin Bond are further unified by his style and treatment. Bond's language is simple yet powerful enough to evoke the awe and majesty of the Himalayas. Recurrent images and metaphors impress themselves on the reader's consciousness: tendrils creeping towards Bond's father and Grandfather, the shadow of an ancient tree on the house, a bougainvillea branch peeping in through the open window, and the *bazaar* as the heartbeat of the town. As these images echo through his poetry, fiction, essays, and autobiography, they lend meaning, depth, and continuity to Ruskin Bond's writings.

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